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In Ethiopians' exodus, Moses was American

"And Pharaoh calling Moses and Aaron, in the night, said: Arise and go forth from among my people, you and the children of Israel."

— Exodus 12:31

By Charles T. Powers
Los Angeles Times

KHARTOUM, Sudan — Like their afflicted ancestors centuries before, they were sick and starving, persecuted Jews trapped in a land of Africa.

Not Egypt this time, but here, in Sudan. Fleeing famine and discrimination in their native Ethiopia, they had become refugees stranded in a world where they were alien.

But like the Hebrews of old, these thousands of Ethiopian Jews found an unlikely Moses. And the full story of their modern-day Exodus during the last several months to a Promised Land is just now being told.

Like the ancient journey, this one brought hazards. There was birth and death, panic and confusion, and travel across the wilderness by night. But there were modern twists:

This time jetliners bore the Jews to safety, and their chief deliverer was not an Israelite, but an American.

Appropriately, it has been called Operation Moses and involved a tribe of Ethiopian Jews, some of whose members trace their ancestry back to what they say was the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

The Jewish refugees were quietly taken from camps in the Sudan and then airlifted to Israel. The operation began on the night of Nov. 21. In all, 36 flights were made, taking about 7,800 Ethiopian Jews from Sudan.

The operation was halted, at the insistence of the Sudanese, two days after news of the airlift was made public in Israel. The last flight was Jan. 6.

When news of the flights leaked and the operation was suspended, it was widely assumed that the Israeli government had masterminded and run the airlift.

However, the Israelis neither planned nor directed the operation's most crucial elements. Similarly, the CIA, which directed a swift airlift to Israel on March 22 of about 500 Jews

who had been left behind, had nothing to do with Operation Moses.

With financing from Israeli sources and the probable blessing of the government of Sudan, the plan for Operation Moses was developed and carried out by a U.S. Embassy official here, a veteran of several years' service in Sudan.

His efforts had the full support of the U.S. State Department, which asked that his name be withheld from this account to avoid possible retaliation from Arab extremists.

The U.S. official's plan for Operation Moses called for the movement of the Jews from the refugee settlement of Tawawa, two miles north of the eastern Sudanese town of Gedaref. They were transported by buses through the night on the only highway from Gedaref to Khartoum, a distance of about 250 miles.

In Khartoum, they were taken to a back entrance to the international airport, where the buses pulled directly up to the loading ramp of a chartered plane in the night parking area of the airport.

The aircraft belonged to Trans-European Airlines, a Belgian charter company that has been described in some news accounts as a front for Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency. From there, the jets departed.

The issue of the Ethiopian Jews is a delicate matter for the Sudanese government, a member of the Arab League that has no relations with Israel.

The story of the Ethiopian Jews in the Sudan began to unfold in March 1984 when word reached Khartoum that large numbers had begun to arrive at Umm Rakoba, a refugee settlement created in 1976 and by then a well-established village.

The Jews traditionally had been looked down on by Muslim and Christian Ethiopians, and many had worked as blacksmiths or potters or in other menial jobs. In Ethiopia, they are called Falashas, a term that the Jews find derogatory and that means "strangers."

Reports said the arriving refugees were malnourished and ill and were huddled, mostly without shelter, in a hastily organized and overwhelmed reception center.

The reports continued through April, May and June, and the anonymous American's visits to the camp confirmed the stories circulating through the refugee-aid establishment in Khartoum. The death rate among the Jews was alarmingly high; some days, as many as 50 people died.

By summer, the situation had begun to stabilize somewhat, with various agencies sending medical teams and supplies of food. But the Jews, accustomed to secrecy and made timid by "literally centuries of persecution," as the American official put it, were resistant to help — often shunning medical attention for fear that their identities would be revealed and persecution against them would continue.

By late summer, word of the problem had reached the attention of high State Department officials in Washington as well as leaders of Jewish organizations in the United States.

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Then in September, the American approached a Sudanese official, from whom he learned that the main obstacle to moving the Jews was their lack of travel documents. He asked the official, whom he described as "a devout Muslim, very sympathetic and a genuine humanist," to try to set up a meeting with a much higher official in the Sudanese government to resolve the problem.

Within 24 hours, a meeting was arranged between the ranking Sudanese and a ranking U.S. diplomat. The diplomat outlined the background of the issue and pointed out that the Jews were becoming a far larger problem than their numbers would suggest.

The Jews, as the Sudanese knew, had begun to attract the attention of various free-lance groups operating under the cover of charity organizations. These groups were attempting to smuggle small numbers of Jews out of the country.

In one incident in March that especially alarmed the Sudanese, a C-130 transport plane of undetermined origin was seen by Arab nomads when it landed in the desert, loaded an unknown number of passengers and took off for an undetermined destination.

On Sept. 21, a cable was drafted to the State Department suggesting that a breakthrough may have occurred on the issue. A plan for the evacuation was ordered drafted.

Fewer than half a dozen Americans in Khartoum — all key U.S. Embassy members — knew what was in the works. Only the one official was actually involved in the execution of the plan.

Meanwhile, about 2,000 of the Jews had managed to move, of their own accord, from Umm Rakoba to Tawawa, near Gedaref, where a small number of them had been living for several years.

It was decided to move this group first, then transport the others from the more remote camps. As it turned out, all the Jews eventually moved through Tawawa.

A staging area was created at the camp by purchasing six huts at the southwestern corner of the settlement and moving out the former occupants.

According to the plan, the exodus would begin with the buses arriving at the corner of the camp just before sunset. They would load the Jews for the five-hour journey through the night to Khartoum.

The first movement, on Nov. 21, was marked by high tension and some confusion. The organizer and his aides were almost overwhelmed when the Jews began to panic and rush aboard the buses. When the

vehicles finally pulled away, the lead bus — seeking a shortcut to the main highway — drove for 30 minutes in the wrong direction, forcing the caravan to backtrack all the way to Tawawa and head for the highway again.

At the edge of Khartoum, the buses paused to await the arrival and refueling of the Belgian chartered plane, a Boeing 707. On the first night, apparently miscalculating the flying time to Khartoum, the plane was late, arriving about 3 a.m. Then, once the Jews were aboard, the Belgian pilot threatened not to fly the plane. There were more than 250 passengers on board, he pointed out, and oxygen masks for only 220.

"It finally came down to making him an offer he couldn't refuse," the American said. "He flew the plane."

Although it was initially believed that the flights could be organized at only three- or four-day intervals, the airlift quickly began functioning every other day. After about three weeks, it was operating on a 24-hour turnaround.